

Farm Service Agency Committees: In Brief

Updated January 29, 2021

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R40179

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) relies heavily on state and local officials to administer Farm Service Agency (FSA) programs. These officials include State Executive Directors and state, county, and area committees. Members of Congress are sometimes called upon to nominate candidates for state positions. This report provides background information on State Executive Directors and state, county, and area committees.

In 1935, the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act (P.L. 74-46) authorized state, county, and community committees to oversee and administer Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service programs and to consider administrative appeals.

The Federal Crop Insurance Reform and Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 (P.L. 103-354) established the Farm Service Agency and authorized a reorganization of USDA. FSA was created by incorporating selected (primarily farm-related) programs from several agencies, including the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (now within the separate Risk Management Agency [RMA]), and the Farmers Home Administration. In 1995, due to the USDA reorganization, community committees were dropped from the official structure of the county committee system. The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-171) included provisions to increase the transparency and accountability of county elections and to provide opportunities for the participation of socially disadvantaged (SDA) farmers in county committees and USDA programs.¹ The Food Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246) increased the number of members to a maximum of 11 for a committee established by combining two or more county or area committees.² It also clarified that a farmer or rancher may serve only on the county committee for the county office where their farm records are administered. The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334) established a pilot program to operate county committees in counties located in urban or suburban areas with a high concentration of urban or suburban farms.

State Executive Directors

State Executive Directors are federal political appointees who participate in developing policies, and in planning, organizing, administering, and directing FSA programs and management activities for their respective states and who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the state FSA office. They are excepted service (schedule C) employees who are appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture under provisions of 5 C.F.R. §213.3301 and serve at the pleasure of the Secretary.³ They are generally nominated by their state's congressional delegation. State Executive Directors are paid at the GS-15 grade level with a salary range (as of 2020) of approximately \$126,810-\$164,858 annually, according to the General Schedule Salary Table for the "rest of U.S." geographic area.

¹ As defined by 7 U.S.C. §2003(e)(2), a socially disadvantaged farmer is a farmer or rancher who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group. As defined by 7 U.S.C. §2003(e)(1), a socially disadvantaged group is a group whose members have been subjected to racial, ethnic, or gender prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities.

² A county committee is deemed an area committee when county offices are closed and consolidated with another county office.

³ Schedule C positions are excepted from the competitive service because of their confidential or policy determining nature.

State, County, and Area Committees

FSA state, county, and community committees were authorized by Section 8(b)(5)(a) of the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act of 1935 (P.L. 74-46, 16 U.S.C. §590h(b)(5)). Community committees were dropped from the official structure of the county committee system in 1995. Area committees came into being more recently when some county offices were closed and consolidated with other county offices into an “area” office. State, county, and area committees share the responsibility and work together to administer FSA programs (7 C.F.R. §7). Each committee meets approximately once a month. If committee members fail to perform their duties, commit fraud, are deemed incompetent, solicit or receive money for political activities, or fail to comply with equal opportunity and civil rights policy, they can be removed from office.

State Committees

Members of Congress may submit to the Secretary of Agriculture a list of nominees from their congressional districts for the state committees. From this list, the Secretary appoints between three and five members who are involved with farming in the state to serve for a term established by the Secretary. USDA has established one-year terms for state committees, which expire on December 31.⁴ Each state committee has one chairperson and up to four members. Once appointed, state committee members are intermittent USDA employees (part time, not on a regular schedule) and are paid by the hour. State committee chairpersons are paid at the GS-15, step 1 salary rate and state committee members are paid at the GS-14, step 1 salary rate.

State committees have both administrative and operational responsibilities. They are responsible for administering various programs, including state agricultural conservation programs, production adjustment and price support programs, livestock programs, Agricultural Market Transition Act programs, and other programs assigned by the Secretary or Congress. Operational responsibilities include the efficient and orderly operations of county committees and county offices. State committees also conduct reviews and hear appeals. They are authorized to take corrective action if a county committee or county office employee fails to make an authorized program accessible and available to producers, fails to carry out a program according to regulations and directives, or does not provide the public with timely and reasonable service. State committees, in conjunction with the State Executive Director, also determine certain local program and administrative policies.

County and Area Committees⁵

Farmers or ranchers residing within a local administrative area under the county committee’s jurisdiction and who participate in a program administered within that area under the county committee’s jurisdiction can run for a position on that county committee. County committee nominees can be a committee member with an expiring term or an eligible voter. They cannot, however, be persons who were dishonorably discharged from military service, removed from public office, convicted of fraud or larceny, or who are current USDA employees or RMA employees or sales agents during their term of office.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Perdue Announces Farm Service Agency State Committee Appointees,” press release, January 4, 2018, at <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2018/01/04/perdue-announces-farm-service-agency-state-committee-appointees>.

⁵ The term *county* also refers to area committees.

County committee nominees may be nominated by an eligible voter or a community-based organization representing socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, or they may nominate themselves.⁶ The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-171) authorized the Secretary to appoint one additional SDA committee member to a committee to achieve the goal of fair representation in a county committee jurisdiction. The Food Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-246) required the Secretary to develop procedures to maintain SDA representation on county committees.

County committees now consist of 3 to 11 members, including the chairperson and vice chairperson. County committee members serve for three years and are paid at a level equivalent to the GS-6, Step 1 grade level on an hourly basis. They are limited to eight hours of work a month. Some committees meet monthly; others meet only a few times per year. County committee members are limited to three consecutive terms.

County committees are responsible for agricultural conservation programs, production adjustment and price support programs, livestock programs, and any other program as assigned. Their duties consist of selecting the County Executive Director; directing outreach activities to inform socially disadvantaged farmers of programs and county committee election processes; reviewing, approving, and certifying applications, forms, reports and documents; recommending and reviewing local administrative area boundaries; informing farmers and the public about FSA programs; providing committee data to other government agencies upon request; giving public notice about the designation and boundaries of each local administrative area within the county prior to county committee elections; informing state committees and others in FSA about suggestions to programs made by farmers; directing the giving of notices in accordance with applicable regulations and official instructions; conducting hearings as directed by state committees; and any other duties as assigned.

County Executive Director

The County Executive Director is a full-time USDA employee responsible for day-to-day county office operations. This includes staffing the county office; receiving, disposing of, and accounting for county office property and money; advising the county committee on election procedures; and assisting the county committee. They are paid under a grade scale that USDA uses for county employees, which is equivalent to the GS-11 and GS-12 grade levels.

Urban and Suburban County Committees

The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-334) established a pilot program to operate county committees in counties located in urban or suburban areas with a high concentration of urban or suburban farms. These county committees focus exclusively on urban agriculture.

The urban and suburban county committees encourage and promote urban, indoor, and other emerging agricultural production practices. Their duties consist of making determinations; listening to appeals and making decisions; and conducting outreach to urban and suburban farms and farmers for both FSA and National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).⁷ Additional duties may include addressing areas such as food access and community engagement and

⁶ Eligible voters must be of legal voting age and be either involved with farming, the spouse of a farmer, or a representative of an entity involved in farming.

⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Urban Agriculture County Committees Frequently Asked Questions,” fact sheet, August 2020 at https://www.fsa.usda.gov/Assets/USDA-FSA-Public/usdfiles/NewsRoom/County-Committee-Elections/pdf/FSA_UrbanAgCountyCommittees_FAQ.pdf.

supporting local activities to promote and encourage community compost and food waste reduction.

Urban and suburban county committees consist of 3 to 11 members and meet at least quarterly. Urban and suburban county committee members terms are for three years, and members have the option to run for reelection for up to three terms or nine years. Urban farmers who participate or cooperate in an FSA program in the local area identified for the urban county committee may either be nominated or may nominate themselves or others. Organizations may also nominate candidates.

The current locations of urban and suburban county committees include Albuquerque, NM; Atlanta, GA; Cleveland, OH; Dallas, TX; Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN; New Orleans, LA; Philadelphia, PA; Phoenix, AZ; Portland, OR; Richmond, VA; and St. Louis, MO.

Author Information

Carol Canada
Senior Research Librarian

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.